



Starting on the Right Foot: New Member Orientation

By Bruce Feustel

New state legislators need to be effective right from the start. Soon after the election, they must deal with constituent demands and learn about the tough policy, taxing and spending decisions facing them in the session ahead. Also, legislatures have become increasingly divided along partisan lines, with many veteran legislators complaining that the spirit of collegiality is waning. The Capitol can be a pretty intimidating place at first. Freshmen legislators often feel overwhelmed with their new challenges.

State legislatures have traditionally addressed this problem by holding new member orientation programs. In these orientations, the first-year legislators hear about the bill drafting, research and other services that are available to them, the basics of legislative procedure and other pertinent topics. New member orientation coordinators are putting the finishing touches on plans for their 2006-2007 orientations. Although there are many differences in the different states orientation programs, there are some themes in the advice planners have for their colleagues:

Avoid Overload. The biggest danger is in providing too much information during new member orientation, to the point where people's eyes start to glaze over. Wendy Madsen, who coordinates Wyoming's orientation, says that "I constantly have to think about what do they [new members] need to know and when do they need to know it. We include something in an orientation session only if it meets those tests." Splitting the orientation program into multiple segments also helps improve the learning process. Many states first hold a short "nuts and bolts" session shortly after the election to put legislators on the payroll, teach them about setting up an office and hiring staff, and generally show where staff agencies are located in the Capitol. A second workshop closer to the actual session may concentrate on legislative procedure and include a mock committee hearing and floor session. Subsequent sessions may address substantive policy areas such as state finances, education or health care or topics like ethical legislative conduct. The key is that coordinators are splitting up the training to minimize information overload.

The other part of avoiding overload is sticking to the essential information. Mary Quaid of Louisiana says that "as staffers, we're trained to think and worry about the details. When you plan new member orientation, you have to resist that impulse and realize that new legislators will learn those details later on." The key to orientation is to get them started on the process of learning what they need to know and where they can get help.

Use Legislators as Faculty. New legislators pay great attention to experienced legislators, so coordinators try to use them as faculty. Often the most popular orientation session is a panel of 2nd term legislators on the topic of "What I Wish I Had Known When I Started in the Legislature." The new lawmakers perk up when they get to hear from the people who have actually been doing the job. John Yeager of New Mexico's Legislative Council says that "current legislators will tell them what they really need to know, they don't tend to hold anything back. Sometimes, as staff, we have to be more reserved."

Get New Members Comfortable with the Building and the People. John Pollak of Iowa's Legislative Services Agency says that one of the most important things is to plan some activities to get the new legislators comfortable in the Capitol, with the staff and with each other. In Iowa, the new legislators are divided into small groups, and they tour the Capitol accompanied by one partisan staffer and one nonpartisan staffer. Freshmen legislators meet the employees in the various agencies and they get to spend some time with their counterparts on the tour. "In a way, it's like the first day of school, but it is important for them to see how they're going to fit in."

Ramping Up on IT. Legislatures are increasingly dependent on their information technology systems, and legislators need to be able to use those systems if they are going to keep up with legislative business. The problem is that "one size does not fit all." The freshmen legislators come in having a wide range of familiarity with and expectations about technology. Often, new member orientation provides only a general introduction, and the IT staff follows up with extensive one-on-one training offered to the members. Pat O'Donnell, Clerk of the Nebraska Legislature, notes that "we do more training on technology every year. Like everybody else, we have more and more tools available for the members."

Remember the Family. Coordinators see great value in holding spouse panels at the orientation. When someone gets elected to the legislature, life changes greatly for everyone in the family. Jim Tanburro, Training and Development Coordinator for the Connecticut Legislature, notes that the "spouse program always gets lots of questions." Families need to learn what to expect in dealing with constituents, the chaos of the legislative session and the need to ensure time together for the family. This often leads to talking about the need to set boundaries, saying "no" sometimes to legislative or community functions.

Keep it interactive. Minnesota Representative Kathy Tingelstad advises coordinators to “keep the orientation activities interactive.” People who win elective office are highly engaged personalities---it is not in their nature to sit back quietly for long periods of time. The orientation works best when the new legislators start practicing the work they will do, such as through mock committee hearings or press conferences, or talk informally with veteran legislators. The interactive sessions also seem to break down some of the barriers between the orientation program faculty and freshmen---after mock committee hearings the new legislators seem much more willing to ask the questions that are really on their minds.

Get Feedback. “We rely on the [orientation evaluation] survey---it’s how we know what’s effective” according to Lynne Porter of Maryland’s Department of Legislative Services. Orientation planners fine tune their training sessions each time, and they can’t rely solely on their own instincts. They need to know what parts of the orientation actually had “take home value” for the new legislators. There is some disagreement on when to conduct the survey. You get a higher return rate if you collect the survey back right at the end of the orientation, but the freshmen legislators often don’t really realize what was valuable in the training until they function on the job for a while.

New member orientation can set the tone for a good legislative session. Legislative leaders and orientation coordinators spend a lot of planning time for what may be a fairly short period of training. That planning time is well spent if it starts new lawmakers off on the right foot, helping them learn the legislative basics and traditions and feel comfortable in the role of legislator.

For more information: NCSL conducted a major [survey about new member orientation in 2002](#) (available here). The study compared the states on factors such as the topics, method, duration and faculty used in their programs and also provided tips and guidelines for new member orientation coordinators and planners.

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Denver Office: Tel: 303-364-7700 | Fax: 303-364-7800 | 7700 East First Place | Denver, CO 80230 | [Map](#)

Washington Office: Tel: 202-624-5400 | Fax: 202-737-1069 | 444 North Capitol Street, N.W., Suite 515 | Washington, D.C. 20001